

Poems Sent before 2005

by

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Broušená štamprdle

Paní Jana
ve vetešnictví
v Podolí
je distingována
dáma

Prodává mi
už podruhé
broušená
štamprdle
pro dceru
ve Spojených Státech

Dostávám slevu

Můj bratranec
kterého jsem
přes padesát let neviděla
stále mu říkám dědečku
či strýčku
což ho zlobí
protože se tolik podobá
mému tátovi
se dokulhal z obchodu ven
a netrpělivě čeká na autobus

Když jsem s nim
byla v tom vetešnictví poprvé
zařval
Ani se toho nedotkni!
Je to hrozny kýč!
zatímco jsem chtěla
zvednout lesklý talíř
který se mi líbil

Bratranec se v Austrálii
naučil rozumět antikám
a tím zbohatl

Kdy zase uvidím pani Janu
od dneška bydlím v Dejvicích
u staré kamarádky

Proč jsem vlastně
opustila rodnou zem
udivuje mne to
když poslouchám dělníky
se bavit jadrnou mateřštinou
pod otevřenými okny činžáku

Uncle Robert

The album starts with your sister, father, and you, aged about twelve, in bathing suits, not displaying your brother, perhaps already dead of TB, nor your mother, who survived long enough to look after me when I was a baby. I leaf through what's left, asking myself, Is this it - a few black and white photos, of you - a ham in a grade school play, later in a French farce.

In a group photo with other soldiers you celebrate Christmas 1932, when I was one year old and did not yet know you. Soon after, you became the idol of my growing up, a favorite uncle with a deep voice, at the piano or pulling an accordion, with a repertoire of folk and drinking songs. You'd pick me up, out of my shyness, permitted to tease, whip merriment into our rigid household, teaching brother Ríša and me our first dance, "Four steps forward, four steps back," carrying your Jewishness through the thirties nonchalantly, losing it like a redundant scarf. They pinned the yellow Jude Star of David above your heart, just the same.

You survive six concentration camps, ending in Birkenau, or was it Buchenwald? On your return in 1945, you can hardly stand, a stickman in the courtyard next to the synagogue, in whose adjacent two room apartment you used to entertain a millionaire, Mr. Roudnický, and other Jewish friends, during the war, before the curfew, your lebensraum, where I used to be sent for summer vacations. After the war, you form a band and play in the Savoy Hotel, not looking at what you left behind, the smoking ovens, lice, typhus.

Then years of nagging by your less tolerant wife. You reluctantly agree to leave your native land. Its anti-Semitism. In Peru you become an instant success, playing several instruments under banana trees, then live on Lima radio, as darling of the rich. But your wife can't stand the gangs of abandoned poor children, whom she feeds at her roadside cafe. In turn, they protect her on her way to the bus during the night.

So off you go, north, with your wife and manager, in search of a democratic country. Boston, Vancouver, Los Angeles. Your final take-off is mercifully sudden - a heart attack, at the wheel of your car. Uninsured, with a huge mortgage and no savings, buried under a small plaque in the Mount Sinai Cemetery, by wife Ann, after thirty years of marriage.

It's August 12, 1998, thirty years since you died, hopefully to live in a mansion, with Lehar and Mozart.

Bent over a novel

Along the cobblestone streets
you push me, a two, then three-year old,
in a stroller, to the nearby cemetery,
where the old chestnut trees open
their umbrellas for you, who don't like the sun.
You sit on a bench, bent over a novel.
I play on the broken, moss-covered gravestones.
Flat beetles scuttle around. I watch them, hushed.

Like the words you read, your thoughts
are foreign to me. I am taken up by movement,
substance, color, shape, yet these silent
afternoons make me forever stay near you.

After an hour or two, you push me
across the street to a patisserie,
where you order a Turkish coffee
with a pastry. I feast on a cream filled, chocolate covered snowman -
sixty-eight/nine years ago.

Can a poem of thanks reach heaven?
It is Mother's Day. You've stayed
dead too long, over forty years.

12.6.1999

Elsa

In the late afternoons, she sits,
watching a television program with her new friends
in the lounge of the Prague Jewish Home for the Elderly,
after languishing four months in hospital.

The residents bear the concentration camps numbers
on their arms. Occasionally, they remember
Auschwitz, Buchenwald, talk about the people
they knew there, for so long gone.

In 1945, my mother took me to visit her
in Prague, a cousin she never before mentioned.
At fourteen, I was dazzled by her merry cheekbones,
above which cocked elegant hats she made for a living.

In the camps, she lost a young husband, a baby,
and numerous relatives. Later, she remarried -
a man who then died of leukemia.
At ninety-one, she does not mind sharing her room

with four other women. Her own apartment
is to be signed over to her grand nephew.
I may never see her again, but I wish her well.
In her features she resembles my mother.

2002

The only New Year's resolution,
made today, the eighth of January,
is to have a steady supply
of poetry books
ready from the library
by my chair -
and reaching for one
several times a day,
each time I feel sad
or at a loss with myself.

Flames will not exit you

Always hoping to get to know you better,
again I ask a question you may be unable
or unwilling to answer - this time it is,
What happens before or after the Light –
when does Darkness enter?

Stunned by the news that you died
yesterday, I rehearse:
Death waited for you on Christmas Day,
your 93rd birthday, and two days later,
during the party thrown for you,
for which, I hear, you were nervous
while putting on a smart dress.
On the seventh of January,
during a snowstorm, I affirm,
I will yet see you - young, vigorous,
as you must have become
before meeting cousin Poldá -
my mother, alone, or surrounded
by a retinue of two husbands,
the baby who died in the concentration Camp,
your parents, other relatives, and friends.

So what if I don't bow before your coffin!
We will soon meet.
These past hours, you've been so busy,
while the redundant body entered rest.

Odešla

Už není

Odešla

Už byla vymazána ze světa

Ne oheň

jen pes paměť

je ji věrný

Straining

Lord
I want to be with you
closer
In your pocket
You don't have any
Your womb
Are you a He?

I want to blend
with your blood
Is it air?
In your veins
rivers?

Want to find
total lack
in your
All
embracing

Mutual listening

It's time to write a poem,
but I wait, not wishing
to return to the cry covered
by premature autumn,
by brown leaves forced
off the trees, raked over
a hurt bird. The stillness
of the heat demands oblivion.
Why doesn't the heart listen
to its teacher? Perhaps
the mind, too, has to learn.